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As Lauce Leues of Pe Boke: Cleanness and the Perils of Vernacular Reading

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"As lauce leues of þe boke:" *Cleanness* and the Perils of Vernacular Reading

Cleanness is written in English. This most obvious fact is not insignificant, for it provides an essential context for considering its content in light of contemporary discussions about vernacular religious texts. *Cleanness* comes out of the final decades of the fourteenth century, in which English was increasingly used in contexts previously reserved for French and Latin.[1] Many fourteenth century writers express no anxieties about vernacular religious texts having detrimental effects upon their audience (*The Idea of the Vernacular* 216), and the church used English texts to educate the laity (Watson, "The Politics" 338). However, the availability of scriptural materials in the vernacular, whether in literary texts, sermons, or translations, was a source of anxiety.[2] Because of concerns about the laity's incapacity to navigate complex doctrinal issues, the educated, Latinate clergy were responsible to "translate Church doctrine" (Potter 79) into terms appropriate to the laity's level of moral rectitude and education. *Cleanness*, with its detailed renditions of scriptural material, should be examined in this context of discussions about the benefits and dangers of religious content in the English vernacular.

The poems of the *Pearl* manuscript, positioned alongside the works of such writers as Chaucer and Langland, participate in a "deliberate… effort to assimilate and displace" (*Idea* 319) French and Latin. These works thus engage in the development of a specifically English community, and the role of vernacular texts in informing that community's character and stability was a central concern to many writing in English (*Idea* 322). *Cleanness* investigates the consequences of vernacular access to scriptural narratives and explores how this access might affect the spiritual wellbeing of its audience. While vernacular texts could strengthen the English

[1] Its dating is uncertain (Staley 3), but critical consensus places it in these decades.
[2] Later, particularly beginning with Arundel's 1409 *Constitutions,* the church heavily restricted access to vernacular texts with religious content.

community, they also presented dangers. The church was concerned that the laity might not have the "ability and willingness to understand what they should from their reading" (*Idea* 212). Furthermore, the restriction of "divergent readings" (*Idea* 115), particularly by those lacking sufficient education, prevented the fracturing of communities united by shared doctrine and helped to preserve a collective religious integrity. As English became "fashionable" (Potter 78), possession of English texts became "a status symbol" for "the lay aristocracy" (*Idea* 131). *Cleanness,* with its courtly ideals[3] and its probably aristocratic audience (Watson, "The *Gawain*-Poet 294), educates its readers about the potential pitfalls attending increased access to religious texts by a vernacular audience lacking the education and spiritual discipline to read them correctly.

Understanding *Cleanness* as an exploration in the dangers of reading allows some of the opposed readings its complex structure has elicited to be reconciled. Responses vary from enthusiastic claims that *Cleanness* aims "actually to render" its readers clean (Potkay 109) to the queasy recognition that "*Cleanness* holds its gaze too long on unclean things" (Ferhatovic 163). Morse argues that the poem's main message urging repentance is conveyed via its "vivid picture" (11) of the consequences both of cleanness and filth, but Wallace's discussion of the "problem of interpretation" (97) arising from the poem's ambiguous imagery and Frantzen's argument that its severe denunciation of sin is accompanied by almost "salacious" (457) descriptions complicate the relationship between the poem's stated didactic ends and its narrative techniques. These readings need not, however, be mutually exclusive when placed in the context of discussions about the perils of reading vernacular religious texts. By drawing readers into a bewildering

[3] Keiser argues that *Cleanness* is a celebration of courtly ideals, and certainly the poem is "elaborately decorative" (17) in places.

maze of complexity and ambiguity that demonstrates how easily sin-prone humans go astray, the narrator engages his audience in an interactive lesson in which he demonstrates the hazards awaiting the undisciplined reader of narratives of sin and judgment, warns them of pitfalls they must avoid in future reading if they wish to enter the kingdom of heaven, and points them toward the course of action necessary to ensure their salvation. This degree of narrative subtlety and coherence, demonstrated by Benson as functioning similarly in *Patience*, positions *Cleanness* as rightly situated with the other, more broadly acclaimed works of the *Pearl*-poet.[4]

The *Cleanness*-narrator directly addresses his readers with the repeated command, "war þe" (545, 1133, 1143), and thereby interrupts the solitary activity of reading. Throughout the fourteenth century conceptions of the individual reader developed, in which the reader was "distinguished as a singular person possessing a unique point of view (Kimmelman 26). This development was accompanied by a self-reflexive interest in the process of reading itself, a theme *Cleanness* takes up.[5] Individual reading was conceived as potentially dangerous because textual ambiguity required informed and skilled interpretation to achieve the right meaning of the text (Copeland 158).[6] As vernacular access to religious texts increased, clergy educated the laity in right reading habits by such methods as including in devotional manuals instructions about how they should be read (Taylor 50).[7] These strategies were necessary to contain the interpretive

[4] Discussions of *Cleanness* are often prefaced with a disclaimer that the poem has either been ignored or treated dismissively. The poem's sophistication has been sufficiently proven, however, and it no longer deserves to bear this appendage.
[5] As Kimmelman notes, such self-reflexivity is key to Chaucer's work (31), and this aspect of *Cleanness* can be positioned within these broader literary currents.
[6] Copeland, discussed by Rhodes (14-15), argues that a new understanding of textual interpretation arose out of Augustine, one that allowed for and dealt with textual ambiguity.
[7] Even the *Wycliffite Bible* displays anxious recognition that instead of writers, it is readers "who control the process by which what they say is understood" (*Idea* 215).

responses of the laity, who lacked the habitual discipline inculcated by Latin grammar, which enforced conformity to authoritative hierarchies (Breen 83) and was understood as paradigmatic "for human virtue" (Breen 39).[8] Vernacular religious texts needed to incorporate these interpretive "safeguards" (Breen 28) to protect their readers' spiritual wellbeing. However, some religious texts are more danger-fraught than others, an understanding the *Cleanness*-narrator acknowledges when he states that while the praise of cleanness comes in "fayre formez" (3), its "contrarė" (4), that is, "the condemning of uncleanness" (Prior 10),[9] is accompanied by "kark and combraunce huge" (4), which involves a burden of interpretive responsibility that the spiritually undisciplined reader will be unable to support. *Cleanness* reveals this danger via its vacillation between detailed fascination with the sins the exempla are supposed to condemn and the narrator's scathing proclamations of the judgment awaiting those who take this kind enjoyment in sin. This narrative structure makes apparent readers' susceptibility to finding pleasure in sin and their need to develop the spiritual discipline of right reading habits.

While educated and spiritually disciplined clergy were supposed to mediate correct teaching to the laity, if the clergy were corrupt, then they could be an unreliable source of guidance and doctrine. An alternative to reliance on an unreliable clergy was for lay audiences to read religious material for themselves, and lay anti-clerical critique coincided with increased attempts to make religious texts available in the vernacular. *Cleanness* both presents religious

[8] Breen further argues that "efforts to develop a vernacular habitus" (5) provide the basis to conceptualize the development of a community of English readers.

[9] The syntax of this line is controversial as the referent for "þe contrarė" is ambiguous. Prior backs her reading of this line with her reading of the poem as a whole. In their footnote Andrew and Waldron translate the grammar as "speaking against cleanness." They state that the reading, "one would have difficulty in illustrating the commendability of purity from stories of impurity" (111), is implausible because the attempt to present a positive account of cleanness from negative exempla is the task the poet undertakes; however, this difficulty is precisely the territory through which the narrator takes readers.

narratives in the vernacular and begins with an acknowledgment of clerical corruption. That members of the priesthood may be "honest vtwyth and inwith alle fylþez" (14) points to a problematic gap between actuality and appearance, and the narrator acknowledges concerns that those charged with providing doctrine for the edification of the laity may not have the required spiritual integrity to fulfill this task properly. However, the poem's anti-clerical critique is incomplete. Those clergy who are clean receive "gret mede" (12), and priestly mediation of religious narrative provides the narrator some of his material, both what he has heard in "masse" (51)[10] and what he has "herkned and herde of mony hyȝe clerkez" (193). This mediated access to religious material is supplemented by what he has "red… myselven" (194). Thus, he is both concerned with the quality of doctrine provided by the clergy and with personal reading practices. As the poem progresses the narrator demonstrates that this problem of a corrupt priesthood cannot be corrected by an incautious adoption of responsibility for scriptural interpretation by individuals lacking disciplined reading habits.

The parable of the wedding feast, with such details as the "onyȝed" (102) and the "balterande cruppelez" (103) being invited, emphasizes the radical inclusivity of the invitation to the kingdom of heaven. This emphasis echoes the "Lollard vision" (*Idea* 342) of nonhierarchical religion, central to which was access to scripture in the vernacular. If, however, the most wretched are invited to God's feast, this rendition of the parable makes another point brutally clear: unyielding judgment awaits those who come spiritually unprepared. The man who incurs the lord's wrath has a fouled "abyt" (141),[11] a word whose connotations extend beyond clothing

[10] Andrew and Waldron translate this line as: "as Matthew tells in his gospel read at mass" (114).
[11] Breen tracks the changing use of "habit" from specifically religious garb and comportment to include that of the laity, a process she argues was part of an endeavour to "Latinize English"and thereby develop a habituated vernacular readership.

to include "moral disposition" (*MED*), and which thus anticipates the nature of his offence, being "sowlé" (168) with sin. "Habit" evokes the context of debates about vernacular texts and whether those without the religious discipline ingrained by Latin grammar are capable of sound reading practices (Breen 27). This discussion about who is fit to handle holy things echoes throughout the parable of the wedding feast, whose point that those encountering the sacred must "be quoynt" (160) is clear and unambiguous and therefore appropriate for a vernacular audience. Having made his warning explicit, however, the narrator now takes readers through a process of learning just how easily soiled their reading habits can become.

The Flood narrative, the first of three negative exampla, "þrynne wyses" (1805) which reveal how "vnclannes tocleves" (1806) God's heart, reveals the difficulty, the "combraunce" attending accounts of divine "malys mercyles" (250) unleashed upon "fylþe vpon folde" (251). At first glance, this exemplum does appear to find "fayre formez" for itself and its readers. The account of "fleschlych dedez" (265) skims along in swift generalizations, after which it focuses on the details of God's precise measurements for the finely crafted ark and concludes with salvation of the righteous, a "comly and clene" (508) sacrifice, and God's "cortays wordez"(512) forming a covenant. Upon closer examination, however, the path to this pious conclusion is beset by perilous distractions. For example, a detailed, sympathetic account of friends embracing and lovers' farewells follows a declaration that all God's "pyté" had "departed" (396) from these sinners. The disjunction between God's wrath and the narrative's empathetic identification with those being destroyed reveals the tendency of humans to place their allegiance wrongly, to pity those whom divine wrath has marked only for destruction, and in pitying, to call into question the rightness of God's judgment.

Those who imbibe the roaring floods of damnation misstep easily if they are unprepared, and the narrator further shows the interpretive blunders resulting from undisciplined readers' dazed and horrified stupefaction at terrific magnitudes of destruction. Noah's frequent prayers are followed by a detailed depiction of the fragility of the ark as it "roled on rounde and rered on ende" (423), as it went wildly "as hit lyste" (415) rather than being under the guiding direction and care of God, and as it appeared to be "in danger" (416). Drawing readers into anxious involvement with his story, the narrator shows them to have become implicated in the sin of doubt when he reminds them of the interpretation aligned with spiritual truth: "Nyf oure Lorde had ben her lodezmon hem had lumpen harde" (424).[12] This line exposes the suspense in which readers had been involved as forgetfulness of God's promise. The narrator thus teaches that becoming sidetracked by the fate of the sinful blurs awareness of God's faithful promise: an unprepared viewing of divine wrath can cause the undisciplined reader to call into question God's goodness.

The raven and the dove represent that both the clean and the filthy can be plucked from out the aftermath of divine judgment. While the raven "fallez on þe foule flesche" (459) and does not return from the carnage, the dove, by contrast, returns with the olive branch, a "syngne of sauyté" (489). By analogy, readers of narratives of judgment on sin can either obsess over the corpses of the damned, or they can turn their attention to God's salvation. The Flood narrative, while it displays undisciplined reading practices, does not entirely buckle under the "combraunce" of its subject matter and instead ends with salvation being found within a narrative of God's judgment on fleshly filth. Thus, readers can take from this negative example the

[12] As noted earlier, this reading is indebted to Benson's reading of *Patience*, about which he makes a similar argument.

message of God's righteousness. However, the narrator emphasizes at length the probing extent of God's gaze, going even "wythinne" (593) a person to try "þe renyez and hert" (592).[13] Disloyalty to the rightness of God's judgment, a disloyalty in which the narrator has shown his readers to be implicated, lurks, that "on spec of a spote" (551) sufficient to bar entrance to the heavenly kingdom. Therefore, the consequences of unguided engagement with scriptural narratives of sin and judgment are dire for the one with improper reading habits, for the one without the discipline to be governed wholly by the righteousness of God's acts within the cataclysmic floods of his wrath.

If the Flood narrative forms treacherous waters for the error-prone reader to traverse, the next exemplum demonstrates with greater explicitness the perils for those who, insufficiently prepared, view sin and judgment. The image of the raven feasting on carnage comes to fruition in this section, as accounts of fleshly sin and harsh vengeance rupture the didactic continuity of the poem, which sinks into sensory engagement with physical defilement. The dangerous undertaking of dealing with sin, insupportable for all but the spiritually astute and disciplined, fractures the poem's didactic intent within the sensual immediacy of its encounter with the sin of the Sodomites. The repeated "What!"s (845-6, 855) punctuating the vivid imagery of anal activity (Frantzen 458), so that "þe worlde," both of Sodom and of the poem, "stynkes" (847), create a sense of unfiltered visceral reaction, form an insistent interjection allowing readers the sense of unmediated proximity with fleshly filth. With this proximity, the urgent need for Lot's escape from Sodom becomes apparent. The angels' warning that he and his family must "neuer… blusch yow bihynde" (904) but must "loke ȝe stemme no stepe" (905) warns the reader not to

[13] See Andrew and Waldron's note on "reynez," such that this line could be translated, "searching out the sexual and emotional longings of every man" (136).

become distracted by looking backward, and Lot's wife's doom reveals the danger that the person who looks on judgment can be paralyzed and unable to reach salvation.

Demonstrating the tendency to continued fascination with filth once sin has been viewed, this narrative that was supposed to be an instructive example implodes into the hellish "pit" (1008) of the Dead Sea, an entrapping hellhole whose victim "most ay lyue… in losyng euermore" (1029). This hideous paralysis figures eternal damnation, the fate of those who attempt to enter God's kingdom with sinful habits. The Dead Sea, into whose "boþemlez" (1022) reek the poem plunges, fills the gap of the ground that has been "torof in riftes ful grete" (964), a rending described in the simile, "As lauce leues of þe boke þat lepes in twynne" (966). This link between the text and its account of the ferocious destruction wreaked by divine vengeance on sin makes explicit the dangerous energy that can be contained within inert pages and warns readers that if they handle narratives of sin and judgment with insufficient prudence and become sidetracked by the enticement of fascinated horror, they may, like Lot's wife, ignore the injunction to hurry on their journey to the solid ground that is the other side of earth-rending wrath. The consequence of such a mistake is ensnarement in sin leading to damnation.

On the banks of the foul sea are "þe fairest fryt þat may on folde growe" (1043),[14] and this image makes apparent the difficulties of discerning the truth of the ambiguous appearances by which sin entices. The narrator has allowed readers to enjoy aesthetic pleasures that could be approached with either holy or carnal intentions. The description of the angels as they enter Sodom "initiates desire" (Frantzen 457), or, at least, it tests whether readers will engage in perverse imaginations about the "swete men tweyne" (789). The disclaimer, that there "watz non

[14] Wallace notes the poem's obsession with the discrepancy "between outward appearance and inner truth" (97).

aucly in ouþer, for aungels hit wern" (795), would not be necessary if the narrator did not anticipate the reading of perverse significations into this depiction of effeminacy. The narrator thus expects that sacred beauty might be put to lustful ends and chastises the reader who has strayed from purity of mind. When the narrative collapses under the difficulties attending the condemnation of uncleanness, it demonstrates the perils of engaging with narratives that can be contained in no "fayre formez," and, in allowing readers to indulge in imaginative proximity to what is dangerous to approach, exposes the deceptive allurement of sin's fascinating surfaces. The fair fruit on the shores of the Dead Sea, like this exemplum, display the aesthetic pleasures that can cover over the rotting reality of forbidden fleshly activities. The story of Sodom, a story of human degradation and divine wrath that should be handled with great care, has, like the fruit, been bitten "in twynne" (1047) through readers' imaginative consumption of the narrative. This phrase reminds that when partaken books too can burst "in twynne" (966) and leave the reader fouled. Having been implicated in absorption in the sin and destruction of Sodom, readers are given the bitter indictment of having feasted on "wynowande askes" (1049), an indictment that lands with strong force when the narrator jars readers back to awareness of the didactic message: "Clerrer counseyl con I non, bot þat þou clene worþe" (1056). He does not, however, abandon his readers in the wasteland into which they have stumbled but proceeds to provide clear counsel about how they should cleanse themselves of their sin-seeking habits.

If the improperly habituated reader has been shown utterly incapable of bearing a pure and disciplined course through the perilous realm of scriptural narratives whose didactic ends can all too easily be perverted by carnal tendencies, the brief passage on Christ's incarnation provides a resting place, a place where the sin-prone reader finds shelter from the allure of the unholy. This "lyric meditation" (Prior 139) achieves a sacramental purity (Prior 140) that points

readers to the way to the kingdom of heaven. Here the narrator displays the "fayre formez" attending praise of the powerful cleanness made clear in Christ's union of divinity and humanity. The text focused on Christ will not lead readers astray.[15] Through Christ comes the possibility of sacramental cleansing so that anyone who is "defowled by vnfre chaunce" (1129) may "polyce hym at þe prest" (1131) and through penance and confession be purified. Having taken readers through the dangers of insufficiently disciplined engagement with scriptural narratives of sin and judgment, the narrator positions himself and his readers as needing spiritual intervention: "Now ar we sore and sinful and sovly vchone" (1111). Thus, he returns his readers to humble placement within the salvific structures of the church that guides the individual's life into accordance with Christ's holiness.

This cleansing made available to all of Christ's church, both clergy and laity, does not make all equally equipped to handle religious writings. Those who are purified by Christ are not guaranteed to remain pure and fit for the kingdom of heaven, for salvation does not constitute spiritual discipline, does not ensure the capacity to resist sinful pleasures. While texts on Christ's holiness may make appropriate reading material for the spiritually weak, these individuals are not thereby automatically ensured the ability to handle all religious material, and the consequences of straying after having been cleansed are severe. "War þe þenne for þe wrake" (1143), the narrator proclaims to his forgetful readers, for whom he now leaves a potent warning of the judgment awaiting them if, after they have been warned and shown the way of salvation, they continue to defile themselves. The narrator's final, most structurally complex exemplum,[16]

[15] Nicholas Love's orthodox *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ* c. 1409 states that the unlearned lay audience needs "principaly to be set in mynde the ymage of Cristes Incarnacion, Passion and Resurreccion" (*Idea* 253).

[16] Bahr argues that this increasing complexity increases the possibility for readers "to go astray" (477).

an allegory of reading sacred symbols, tests whether readers, who have just been led into sacramental purification, have yet learned the lesson not to engage uncleanly with sacred narrative.

Plentiful aesthetic pleasures soon entrance and embroil in difficulties readers who have not yet learned disciplined discernment. Belshazzar's court presents a dizzying avalanche of auditory and visual imagery that creates a sensual bewilderment paralleling the heathen king's drunkenness. The glittering rooms arrayed with banners "blusnande of golde" (1404), decked with exotic animals, and brimming with flurries of sounds that "batered so þykke" (1416), recreates the confused and intoxicating atmosphere of this sinner's extravagant indulgence. As Wallace notes, the signification of symbols and and descriptives in *Cleanness* is characterized by a persistent ambiguity (97), and, while the narrator quickly grounds his description with a harsh judgment of Belshazzar as "Satanas þe blake" (1449), the difficulty of differentiating between the sacred and the sinful is underscored by the echoing of shared descriptions of the sacred vessels and the corrupt court. For example, "asure and ynde enaumyld ryche" (1411) echoes "enaumylde with azer" (1457), and "Foles in foler flakerande bitwene" (1410) is recalled in the lines, "And al bolled abof with braunches and leues / Pyes and papejayes portrayed withinne" (1465-6). Gleaming azure and glittering birds adorn both the ornate holy vessels and the heathen court.

This blurring of language to describe sinful and sacred contexts emphasizes just how difficult right interpretation can be. Readers either can integrate the pleasures of that which is sacred into corrupt habits of sinful enjoyment, as does Belshazzar, and face severe judgment or, like Nebuchadnezzar, can react with respectful awe. Nebuchadnezzar, while lacking special spiritual knowledge, can interpret rightly those vessels, which can be read by anyone who encounters them; however, their right reading relies upon the inner rectitude of the person

engaged with them. While interpretation may be rife with error for the undisciplined soul, the untrained reader who, like Nebuchadnezzar, responds with "reuerens" (1318) and, instead of parading around these divine symbols for sensual enjoyment, entrusts them to a "tryed place" (1316), will not incur divine wrath for misuse of the sacred.

In this allegory of reading, the fear-inspiring words inscribed with the "roȝ penne" (1724), whose inscrutable violence harkens to the previous exempla dealing with the uncontainable power of God's judgment, can only be read rightly by one specially commissioned by God. Daniel, while a prophet who "hatz þe gost of God" (1598), also is "ful of scyence" (1599), which refers specifically to learning (*MED*). Daniel's learning, in contrast to that of the practitioners of the dark arts who are "brought forward lewed lettres to rede" (1596) but who lack his godly learning and spiritual discipline, allows him to understand the mysterious letters and to explicate their meaning, which he says "I fynde" in accordance to what "oure Fader lykes" (1726). Daniel's reading of the grim letters is a disciplined conformity to the will of God. Furthermore, Daniel teaches Belshazzar by an exemplum. His story of Nebuchadnezzar's going astray in pride, being brought low, and then returning to God has a clear moral. He thus shows discernment about what kinds of narrative will be appropriate for a sin-prone audience, and in him meet both the skilled, faithful reader and the upright teacher of spiritual truths.[17]

Daniel, as a figure of spiritual authority whose interpretation of God's message must be heeded to avoid divine wrath, points toward the authoritative religious structures through which readers have been shown they can partake in the purity embodied in Christ. Belshazzar, who ignores the truth presented him by a spiritual authority, continues in the intoxication of sinful pleasure and meets immediate and gory judgment. He is the final example with which the

[17] Potkay reads Daniel as "an eloquent teacher whose discourse spreads God's word" (104).

narrator leaves his readers, whom he has positioned parallel to Belshazzar. Like him, they have engaged in corrupted enjoyment of sacred matters and have been corrected. Having been shown the purity of Christ and the attendant vision of a holy human life, and having been directed to purify themselves through confession and penance, readers who continue to stray from the holy use of sacred narrative will not gain entrance to God's kingdom but will meet certain judgment.

The abrupt ending thus leaves readers with a question that extends beyond the parameters of this poem: how will they deal with the responsibility of broader access to vernacular scriptural narratives? Will they engage with these texts with the disciplined holiness that comes from conformity to Christ and church doctrine, or will they allow their sin-prone dispositions to lead them into defiled interaction with the sacred material now available to them? Reverberating through this question left open to readers is the warning that such corruption is certain to incur divine judgment on both the individuals and communities found soiled with spiritual uncleanness. Thus, the poem's abrupt, seemingly truncated ending forms a potency propelling *Cleanness*'s lessons into the lived contexts of its readers. Far from being merely a confused grouping of superficially connected negative examples fumbling to provide a moral whose rendering is haphazardly conceived, *Cleanness* is a tightly executed investigation into the perils of increased access to vernacular texts, whose readers are likely to lack the spiritual discipline and upright habits necessary for right reading of texts whose inert pages, when opened, explode with the potency of human sin and divine wrath.

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